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XXVII. EMERSON AS POET OF NATURE

I

If it may be said of Emerson's writings that

In his every syllable
Lurketh Nature veritable,

Thoreau should be given much, perhaps most, of the credit. For Emerson owed as much to Thoreau in respect to the material world as Thoreau owed to him in respect to the world of spirit. Remove the details of material nature from Emerson's essays,¹ and you will rob them of much of their charm and power, since the author would be in perpetual danger of soaring aloft, balloon-fashion, among his "Circles" in worlds unrealised. Remove them from his *Poems*, where the sensuous, the concrete, is vitally necessary, and the poetry itself is gone with them. By a most happy conjunction of events, the very man who perhaps of all his countrymen had most to give Emerson, was his fellow-townsmen, his friend, his companion in countless walks to the pine-groves, a valued assistant in editing the *Dial*, the guardian of his hearth while he sojourned abroad, and a sympathetic interpreter and critic of his inner life. Their friendship was not, of course, a free union of personalities, though we must make allowance for the stiffnesses of the Puritan tradition and bear in mind that, if Emerson would as soon think of embracing a tree as putting his arm around Henry, the forbidding Henry could be a charming Piper of Hamelin to the Emerson children,² could sing his favorite "Tom Bowling" under the shelter of a rock during a shower in the presence of R. W. E. himself, and, when the mood was right, could dance with something like abandon. For years

¹ He thought of calling his chief collection of essays, that of 1841, *Forest Essays*.

² See the gracious memorial written by one of these children, Dr. Edward Emerson: *Henry Thoreau, as Remembered by a Young Friend*, Boston, 1917.

they wandered together over the Concord hills and meadows, exchanging their learning and their aspirations as freely as Wordsworth and Coleridge in the Somerset days. They were meant to be mates; they complement each other; in them is illustrated the idea in "The American Scholar" that the ancient doctrine "Know Thyself" (which may stand for Emerson) coincides at last with the modern doctrine "Study Nature" (which may stand for Thoreau). In the world of outer nature, Emerson constantly deferred to the "river-God," the "forest seer," at his door. "Thoreau tells me"—what more would you have? He seemed to know everything, as by intuition:

It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him,

as he says in the familiar stanza in "Woodnotes." The sights of his walks "with Henry" he reports as scrupulously as Henry himself. How he, too, revels in names, handles to things, especially erect, manly Latin names:

We found *Saxifraga Pennsylvanica*, and *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*,
by Everett's spring, and *Stellaria* and *Cerastium* and *Arabis rhomboidea* and
Veronica anagallis. . . .

How blissful, even unto an exclamation point, on finding "two Polygalas with checkerberry scent!" How slyly satisfied when the wood-god is found fallible—when they come upon "a tall shrub unknown to Henry." With what scientific ardor the two philosophers examine young oak leaves, comparing the black, the scarlet, and the red, and how importantly the particular philosopher in question concludes that "the penetrating the bark of the first to find the yellow *quercitrum* must be for me the final test." And how docilely he, too, is mystified by that ridiculous "night-warbler" that vexed Thoreau's scientific soul for twelve years; how docilely he, too, commits the unpardonable sin of hearing the myrtle warbler when it is the white-throat that sings. Emerson had, by instinct, nothing at all of the scientist in him; as he remarks, just after a walk with Thoreau to see *Ranunculus*

abortivus and *bulbosus* and the rest of his friends, "We never see mosses, lichens, grasses, birds, or insects which are near us every day, on account of our preoccupied mind." And then he adds what surely is a resounding tribute to his tutor, "When our attention is at last called to them they seem the only things worth minding."

But he did not mind them long: most of the time he was bound to be preoccupied with an idea or a fancy. When Thoreau one day pointed out to him that a river has a male and a female bank, the pickerel-weed keeping to the female bank, we may be sure that Emerson was soon lost in his inner world of compensation, action and reaction, male and female. When, another day,—“the finest day, the high noon of the year”—he went with Thoreau on an excursion in a wagon, he may well have experienced the feeling described in the following passage, in which the compact earth beneath him crumbles and melts away:

Nature is the true idealist. When she serves us best, when, on rare days, she speaks to the imagination, we feel that the huge heaven and earth are but a web drawn around us, that the light, skies and mountains are but the painted vicissitudes of the soul.

The world, in his idealistic philosophy, is “mind precipitated, and the volatile essence forever escaping again into the state of free thought.” In nature, therefore, he in a sense found thought: and wherever thought was to be found, thither Emerson would instinctively make his way. That is the underlying reason for the prominence of nature in his writings—from “little azure-colored Nature” onward—and in his mode of life at Concord. But there is another reason on the surface: his pleasure in nature, his “child’s love of it.” In his first book, after casting every manner of doubt on the reality of the external world, he turns suddenly, remarking that, after all, he has no hostility, only love, for nature. “I expand and live in the warm day,” he says, “like corn and melons.” Time and again he is to discover himself feeling that the visible universe is but an insubstantial web;

time and again, as he listens to the wood-bird, the thought will come that

When that bird sang, I gave the theme;

yet in the main he will accept joyfully the independent existence of the world about him, act in it as men are wont to do, play in it happily in the spirit of childhood, gather facts about it from Thoreau and others as if the facts were themselves ultimate. He concerned himself always, not only with *natura naturans*, but also with *natura naturata*; and it is with *natura naturata* that we too, in the following pages, will mainly concern ourselves

II

Wandering almost daily over familiar, well-tried paths, oftenest to the shores of Walden Pond, alone or with a companion, or paddling up the river-paths to see the world, as it were, with a different perspective, Emerson came to know his natural surroundings almost as well as Thoreau himself. From the mighty world of eye and ear he chose what seemed especially proper to him, relatively ignoring the rest. What did he choose? What aspects of outer nature roused to lively activity his inner nature?

Not, certainly, the sounds; *his* book *Walden* would not have contained a chapter on "Sounds." "That which others hear," he says, "I see. All the soothing, plaintive, brisk or romantic moods which corresponding melodies awaken in them, I find in the carpet of the wood, in the margin of the pond, in the shade of the hemlock grove, or in the infinite variety and rapid dance of the tree-tops as I hurry along." According to his son, he had a good sense of form, drawing heads for his children's amusement aptly, and enjoying Greek sculpture rather than painting in which color dominates form. It may be so, though in his writing Emerson's sense of form somewhat oddly fails to assert itself, and in nature the only lines he frequently admires are the circles or part circles such as the horizon and the

rainbow. His son adds, "He had less eye for color;" and here, surely, we must disagree.

Through "the flowing azure air" he saw the world in a radiant, iridescent shimmer. "In the landscape felt the magic of color; the world is all opal, and those ethereal tints the mountains wear have the finest effects of music on us." The sea is "the opaline;" upon the land the divine "million-handed painter" has poured—

Opal hues and purple dye.

The fickleness of nature's coloring is greatly enhanced for him by the chiaroscuro of—

the cloud-shadow on the lea,

of the

Leopard-colored rills,

of the infinite changes of the hours:

. . . . Yonder ragged cliff
Has thousand faces in a thousand hours.

This fluid harmony of color is composed, as the opal is, of various brilliant colors. Emerson sees them sometimes with startling distinctness, as in this prose account:

Is all this beauty to perish? Shall none remake this sun and wind, the sky-blue river, the river-blue sky; the yellow meadow spotted with sacks and sheets of cranberry-pickers; the red bushes; the iron-gray house with just the color of the granite rock;

or this verse account:

Through files of flags that gleamed like bayonets,
Through gold-moth-haunted beds of pickerel-flower,
Through scented banks of lilies white and gold.

If repetition indicates anything, purple was the color that he saw most or liked most. He writes of "the purple sea," of "the purple mountain," of "the cold and purple morning," of "the purple landscape," of "the purple cloud"—his clouds, in particular, are somewhat monotonously purple. All of his attraction to color is expressed in the Journal passage in which he comments on Channing's remark that

"As for beauty, I need not look beyond an oar's length for my fill of it." "I do not know," says Emerson, "whether he used the expression with design or no, but my eye rested on the charming play of light on the water which he was striking with his paddle. I fancied I had never seen such color, such transparency, such eddies; it was the hue of Rhine wines, it was jasper and verd-antique, topaz and chalcedony, it was gold and green and chestnut and hazel in bewitching succession and relief, without cloud or confusion." If anything, Emerson's eye for color was stronger than his eye for form.

His ear for music was so deficient that he could not recognize with certainty even the commonest airs, and though he attended concerts dutifully, derived little from good music—"it looked to me as if the performers were crazy, and all the audience were make-believe crazy, in order to soothe the lunatics, and keep them amused." Of nature's sounds he enjoyed echoes, boughs buffeting boughs in the wind, and

. . . . the gasp and moan
Of the ice-imprisoned flood

when

Blue Walden rolls its cannonade.

The south wind—"the wizard South"—was his favorite, but less for its touch, perhaps, than for its melody—"the musical, steaming, odorous south wind, which converts all trees to windharps." No sounds did he value so much as the eerie voice of the Aeolian harp in his west window—see, for example his poems "The Harp" and "Maiden Speech of the Aeolian Harp"—and nature's Aeolian harp, the pine-tree.

Tie a couple of strings across a board and set it in your window, and you have an instrument which no artist's harp can rival. It needs no instructed ear; if you have sensibility it admits you to sacred interiors; it has the sadness of Nature, yet, at the changes, tones of triumph and festal notes ringing out all measures of loftiness.

Such perceptiveness as he had, Emerson cherished; and his curiosity in large measure made up for his lack of the

instinctive perceptiveness of the naturalist. Essentially an idealist, he nevertheless was deeply interested in natural science, in the law for thing, and took his opportunities very seriously: "The first care of a man settling in the country," he says, "should be to open the face of the earth to himself by a little knowledge of Nature, or a great deal, if he can; of birds, plants, rocks, astronomy." This he did, with the help of Thoreau and Channing. His aims were various. Among them was the satisfaction of the instinctive love we all feel for the concrete world, round which we hover "as moths round a lamp." Among them was also the adjustment of the poet's imagination to the facts of outer nature: "The poet loses himself in imaginations, and, for want of accuracy, is a mere fabulist." Accuracy of this kind has been prized, even misprized, by the poets of the nineteenth century; when so wayward a genius as Whitman changes the "calves" of his she-whale to "calf," fidelity to fact may be said to be deified. In Emerson this modern instinct is ever operative. For example:

Each maple leaf turned up its silver side.

And even when the happy child
In May beholds the blooming wild,
And hears in heaven the bluebird sing.

"In heaven" is precisely right. And here is the chickadee ("titmouse") of this amateur ornithologist—I have italicized the phrases most indicative of his accuracy:

Flew near, with soft wing grazed my hand,
Hopped on the bough, then, *darting low*,
Prints his small impress on the snow,
Shows feats of his *gymnastic play*,
Head downward, clinging to the spray.

For men mis-hear thy call *in Spring*,
Crying out of the hazel copse, *Phe-bel*
And, *in winter*, *Chic-a-dee-dee!*

In such passages, moreover, together with fidelity to fact we find a certain charm that gives life and motion to the

image, delighting us with an odd, pretty, penetrating truth of vision:

When the fungus broad and red
Lifts its head

Like poisoned loaf of elfin bread.

The cold gray down upon the quinces lieth
And the poor spinners weave their webs thereon
To share the sunshine that so spicy is.

He loved to watch and wake
When *the wing of the south-wind* whipt the lake
And the glassy surface in ripples brake
And fled in pretty frowns away
Like the flitting boreal lights,
Rippling roses in northern nights,
Or like the thrill of Aeolian strings
In which the sudden wind-god rings.

In all his writings, it is evident that Emerson kept his eye on the object—what a clear, piercing eye, such passages indicate as well as do his portraits. That he consequently learned “a great deal . . . of birds, plants, rocks, astronomy,” can be demonstrated by a glance at his works.

Of astronomy it is true that, though it fascinated him through life, he never attained much tangible knowledge. The stars, those “birds of ether without wings,” or “heavenly ships without a sail,” or, as he called them collectively at the beginning of his first book, the “City of God,” roused his literary interest even in his school days—there is still extant a “theme” on astronomy that was the outcome of an impression received one night as he crossed the spacious Common. Later he read of the lives and achievements of such men as Kepler, Newton, and Herschel, and looked forward to a study of astronomy in his old age. His night walks at Concord were taken mainly with a view to knowing the stars better. It is an objection to astronomy, he says to Channing, “that you light your candle at both ends. After you have got through the day and ’tis necessary you should give attention to the business of sleeping, all hands are called; here come Canopus, Aldebaran, and all stars, and

you are to begin again." And often he did begin again; for, after the dissipating sunlight and the fluid moods that characterize the day, which finally make one doubt one's identity, then "these expressive points, always in their place so immutable" tranquillize us, lead us toward the One in the many.

Everything between the stars and the skiey spaces and the nearest and smallest object of nature, such as the insects, Emerson regarded with an inquiring spirit. In our day this seems usual enough; but "some of us can recall," with the late T. W. Higginson, "the bewilderment with which his verses on the humblebee, for instance, were received, where the choice of subject seemed stranger than the words themselves. It was called 'a foolish affectation of the familiar.' " That it is not affectation may be proved, not only by the poem itself, but by the testimony of John Burroughs, who says, "Emerson's best natural history poem is the 'Humblebee.' " Of the dozen or more insects that one meets in Emerson's poetry, the humble-bee occurs oftenest. The "poor, tooting, creaking cricket" gets in only once; more than once we see the curious fire-fly:

. harlot flies
Flashed their small fires in air, or held their court
In fairy groves of herd-grass;

A half dozen times at least we see and hear the—

Burly, dozing humble-bee
.
Zigzag steerer, desert cheerer,
Let me chase thy waving lines;
Keep me nearer, me thy hearer,
Singing over shrubs and vines.

This "yellow-breeched philosopher," it will be remembered, teaches him to see only what is fair, sip only what is sweet; but at bottom he prizes him, rather, as a symbol of the summertime.

Passing by Emerson's miscellaneous animals, from salamanders to behemoths, we come to the birds, some

two score of them—a very large number for a single volume of poems. His bardic love of the birds Emerson expressed directly:

Beloved of children, bards and Spring,
O birds, your perfect virtues bring,
Your song, your forms, your rhythmic flight,
Your manners for the heart's delight,
Nestle in hedge, or barn, or roof,
Here weave your chamber weather-proof,
Forgive our harms, and condescend
To man, as to a lubber friend,
And, generous, teach his awkward race
Courage and probity and grace!

Like Lowell at Elmwood, he was a happy observer of the birds from his study window; near which, in a balsam, he could see the ground-sparrow, oriole, cedar-bird, crossbill, yellowbird, goldfinch, catbird, robin, and "particolored warbler." Going to the woods not far away, he heard the spiritual wood-thrush, transcribing his song with matchless skill: "*Ah Willie Willie; He Willio, willio,*" and in the meadows behind his house the chorusing red-winged black-bird. The admirably accurate line—

The redwing flutes his *o-ka-lee*,

is probably only in part Emerson's.

But Emerson's bird—truly an Emersonian bird, as Burroughs says—is the chickadee. Lowell's rich, warm, vivacious songsters, the oriole and bobolink, are not for him; his is the stout-hearted wintry chickadee, the companion of his walks in all seasons and weathers:

. . . . piped a tiny voice hard by,
Gay and polite, a cheerful cry,
Chic-chic-a-dee-dee! saucy note
Out of sound heart and merry throat,
As if it said, "Good day, good sir!
Fine afternoon, old passenger!
Happy to meet you in these places,
Where January brings few faces!

lines so sympathetically accurate that no one who knows them and the bird can fail to see as in life the little animated spirit in gray with the shining, black, bead-like eyes. This poem on "The Titmouse" is Emerson's final expression of affection for his valiant little companion, from whom he draws the sympathetic, but otherwise somewhat inadequate conclusion that—

The reason of all cowardice
Is that men are overgrown,
And, to be valiant, must come down
To the titmouse dimension.

The flowers of Emerson's poetry are astonishingly varied. After drawing up a list of them³ one is inclined to regard this lover of the abstract as the foremost botanist in American poetry. Perhaps he is; but it must be said at once that the great majority of his flowers are merely mentioned, without indication that he was on familiar and first-hand terms with them. Few, besides, are mentioned more than once, and those mentioned oftenest—the lily, the violet, and the rose—are as characteristic of village gardens as of wild nature. The rose easily outdistances all competitors, being used over thirty times; while clover occurs only five times, the tulip four, and goldenrod once. Why Emerson had recourse to the rose so often is not altogether clear. It is not a matter of rhyme, although, as a monosyllable, the word is more serviceable than the name of many another Concord flower, such as the pickerel-weed (or *pontederia*) that everywhere borders the dark river with its lovely blue.

³ Violet, rose, rhodora, laurel, lily, water-lily, cowslip, gentian, aster, flag, pickerel-weed, bilberry, daffodil, succory, columbine, agrimony, clover, catchfly, adder's tongue, blackberry, orchis, linnaea, hyson, wall-flower, rue, cinquefoil, gill, vervain, blue vetch, trillium, hawkweed, sassafras, milkweed, Indian pipe, sundew, pulse, wild grape, lespedeza, tulip, lilac, azalea, mallow, whip-scorpion, polygonum, hydnium, harebell, barberry, anemone, wild tea, wild pea, coreopsis, liatris, peppermint, sweet fern, mint, panax, elder, sarsaparilla, vanilla, hellebore, checkerberry, polygala, benzoin, mouse-ear, wintergreen, goldenrod, bulrush. (A few of these may duplicate each other; it is not always clear what species Emerson meant.)

Partly, no doubt, it is a matter of convention, the rose being one of the first flowers that come to mind, especially, it seems, when we are writing verse. Mainly, however, he selected the rose because he preferred it: both the splendor and labyrinthine perfection of the cultivated rose, and the shy beauty of the wood rose blossoming unseen save for his admiring eyes. In writing a poem on the rhodora, he addresses his forest friend with unintentional condescension as a "rival of the rose." Elsewhere he chooses the rose as a symbol of beauty; and, again, he asserts that it speaks all languages to youth; and, once more, tells us that Saadi, who is Emerson, faring divinely, drinks the wind and eats roses.

"To know the trees is, as Spenser says of the ash, 'for nothing ill,'" Emerson writes in his essay on Resources. He knew enough of them to give emphasis to a score of species in his poems, the commonest ones oftenest; though the elm, with its feminine graces, is mentioned but once, while the sturdy oak is mentioned twenty-three times, nearly as often as his beloved pine.

To Emerson, as to Thoreau, the white pine is the genius of the North, an untameable old Norse wood-god, hoary, ancient, wise in all things, communicating vitality to both body and mind of the chaste, unsentimental worshipper, and instilling, now and again, through his murmuring harp-strings, through his cathedral columns illuminated by the western sun as by stained glass, an indeterminate hint, a whisper of ultimate being, that fills the votary with a divine frenzy or an ineffable serenity: a hint incalculable and a memory priceless, that adds to his daily thought and all his outward life a sense of lift, a consecration, a spiritual experience. This is no exaggeration; whatever Emerson may have thought of the actual pine before him, he did not question what happened within his own nature when he walked in his pine grove at Walden, and there was abandon enough in his Puritan blood to make him ascribe the state of being to the possible outer cause—at least, in his verse:

Heed the old oracles,
Ponder my spells;
Song wakes in my pinnacles
When the wind swells.
Soundeth the prophetic wind,
The shadows shake on the rock behind,
And the countless leaves of the pine are strings
Tuned to the lay the wood-god sings.
Hearken! Hearken!
If thou wouldst know the mystic song
Chanted when the sphere was young.
Aloft, abroad, the paean swells;
O wise man! hear'st thou half it tells?

It was to hear the *other half* that Emerson tramped daily to his oracular pines. In his poems he tried to express part of that other half, as in "Wood-Notes," especially "II," which is saturated with the incense of his sacred groves. Nowhere, in any literature, unless in Thoreau's writings, do we find this same wild-sweet fragrance, feel this stimulating sense of the North so sharply. It is at once ancient and modern—this sense of an inscrutable wild old nature penetrated with the modern affection; it is also Puritan, in its depth of spiritual energy, its sense of awe, and its emphasis on purity; it is American, too, in its buoyancy, for though Emerson's oracle can speak, as he says, all languages—Italian, English, German, aye, can address the Fin and Lap and swart Malay—it speaks with an unmistakable American accent.

III

Such enchantments, says Emerson, are medicinal, sobering and healing us. We perceive with never-ending astonishment the accommodation of the life of man to the life of nature: rejoicing at the refreshment given us by the cold water from the spring, at the relief afforded by the wood-fire when we are chilled. These elementary physical satisfactions win for nature our gratitude, our trust, our sense of a friendship that knows no beginning and will know no end. Above these satisfactions, however, are the subtler health-

giving properties of nature when her equanimity steadies our nerves, heals our wounded or balked spirits, restores us to ourselves. They lose their grief who hear *her* song:

. A woodland walk,
A quest of river-grapes, a mocking thrush,
A wild rose, or rock loving columbine,
Salve my worst wounds.

She will not tolerate our petty woes, and belittles even our larger woes, bathing us in an atmosphere that cools and purifies and elevates. "When we come out of the caucus, or the bank, or the Abolition-convention, or the Temperance-meeting, or the Transcendental club into the fields and woods, she says to us, 'So hot? my little Sir.'" If Emerson were living in these still more troubled times, we may be sure he would seek, and find, healing and new energy, and therefore new light, in his woodland walks.

Many nineteenth century poets have been vividly conscious of this healing power of nature. It has been their inevitable haven of refuge from the fevers and alarms of these latter days; other centuries, more healthy because more assured and more at home in the universe, have said little about it. Even Emerson, far more assured than most of his contemporaries, finding within his own spiritual nature the support that others sought without, felt the need keenly. But he perceived higher effects also. "There are all degrees of natural influence," he remarks, "from these quarantine powers of nature, up to her dearest and gravest ministrations to the imagination and the soul."

In the attainment of these higher effects, we have but one instrument—love. Lacking that, our knowledge is vain, our conquest of nature is barren, we are but strangers in her presence:

The injured elements say, 'Not in us';
And night and day, ocean and continent,
Fire, plant and mineral say, 'Not in us';
And haughtily return us stare for stare.

Or, as he says in another poem,

To read the sense the woods impart
You must bring the throbbing heart.

Then you shall find them full of solicitation, then you shall know that—

The gods talk in the breath of the woods,
They talk in the shaken pine,
And fill the long reach of the old seashore
With dialogue divine.

In the main inarticulate, their talk is not unmeaning. Nature and man nod to each other, like old, old friends. When the man approaches her rightly, her countenance lights up with benignant recognition. Crossing the bare common, while night is descending and snow puddles shine rather dismally here and there, Emerson experiences a flooding exhilaration, and a gladness that passes understanding dwells with him for a time. At such unpredictable moments Emerson felt convinced that nature is moored to the soul.

Always he found that these moments are unpredictable; like Thoreau he soon discovered that nature will not yield herself to man's whim:

Casualty and Surprise
Are the apples of her eyes.

He speaks of "a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction" that brands nature as a coquette. In his *Journals* he records that, returning to Concord from Waltham one night with Elizabeth Hoar, his companion said, in Lincoln woods, "that the woods always looked as if they waited whilst you passed by—waited for you to be gone"; and in his essay on History, in which Elizabeth becomes "a lady with whom I was riding in the forest," he elaborates the idea, comparing it with what he regards as its incarnation, so to speak, in fairy lore—the fairies breaking off their dance on the approach of man. Like Thoreau, with whom he must have discussed his experience, Emerson was obliged to describe his "oracular

woods" as "inscrutable and mute." He accepted the paradox with a good grace. Feeling at times a sense of derision in nature, which he would at first resent, he concluded nevertheless that a single look at the solemn face of nature "lays all petulance at rest, and soothes us to wiser convictions. To the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained." And he goes on to say that the wise man will not seek to identify himself with the work, but rather with the Workman. In the order of nature, that workman is the World-Soul; in the order of man, the Over-Soul. Let man seek the soul, then, not through the medium of nature, whose most articulate messages are only dubious hints, but immediately within himself, renouncing for the moment the life that links man with nature, and letting the higher self, the self that is not self, emancipate itself in ecstatic union with universal spirit. Let him remember, likewise, that the mystic way "points to virtue as to

The golden key
Which opes the palace of eternity."

If the author of "Comus" never wavered, as Emerson did, in his attitude toward the natural universe; if his conception of virtue and the problem of evil, despite its theologic trappings, was more profound, he was not more assured than Emerson himself, true descendant of the Puritans, of "the eternal distinction between the soul and the world" and the ineluctable authority of the Moral Sentiment.

NORMAN FOERSTER.